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AUTHOR	Krueger, Lyle L.; Porter, Cyndi Wilson; Burke, Daniel
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ABSTRACT

While the distance learning curriculum at Lakeland College (Wisconsin) began 20 years ago, the idea for Lakeland Online was conceived about two and one-half years ago. A variety of delivery modes were considered before discovering Convene software. Since the communication process enabled by the Convene software is asynchronous and requires only a modem-equipped PC, it met requirements for non-time and non-place-sensitive delivery. Once a school has decided to work with Convene to offer online courses, it needs to evaluate the market and identify a niche that it can service. The next step is faculty training. Lastly, the school needs to implement an effective marketing program. Lakeland Online courses are configured so that, in addition to a main class meeting, each course has five additional meetings: Syllabus, Lecture, Biography, Discussion, and Homework. The faculty support program includes a four-week online training session, a mentor program, the course evaluation, and an online "faculty lounge." Student and faculty reactions to this initiative have been strongly positive. An evaluation study found that there was no statistical difference in the learning outcomes between onground and online classes. (AEF)

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Asynchronous Education:
A Blueprint for the Future of Adult Learning

Lyle L. Krueger
Vice President for Educational Technology
Director, Lakeland Online
Lakeland College

Dr. Cyndi Wilson Porter
Assistant Professor, Division of Natural Sciences
Associate Director, Lakeland Online
Lakeland College

Daniel Burke
Director of Distance Learning
Convene, Inc.

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Background

Lakeland College, located in Sheboygan Wisconsin, currently enrolls about 3,600 students. Of these, almost two-thirds study in our evening degree-completion programs. We began our content rich, high integrity "distance learning" curriculum 20 years ago, literally "taking the college to the student." At the present time we operate ten evening sites around the state.

Through this two decades of experience, we have come to learn a great deal about the needs, wants, and desires of adult learners. We have learned, for instance, that our evening students are *not* looking for easy, short-cut educational programs but, instead, are willing to commit substantial time and energy resources to complete a quality educational experience. On the other hand, we also know that the demands of work, family, and community make the rigidity of onground classes less and less attractive.

Advances in computer and telecommunications technology allowed us to consider "outside the box" opportunities to provide a quality educational product while responding to the increasing time constraints of our students. The idea for Lakeland Online was conceived about two and one-half years ago. We considered a variety of delivery modes which might meet our objectives.

We investigated satellite and land-line delivered inter-active televised courses. We rejected this approach as being too complex and too capital intensive. In addition, this process did not address time-bound and place-bound issues we felt were critical to a new program's success. Students would still need to gather at a particular site at a particular time in order to participate.

We briefly considered video-taped courses, delivered by mail directly to the student's home, as a potential alternative. This process, however, smacked too much of "correspondence study" and completely voided the recognized benefits of student interaction and cooperative learning.

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We looked at the Internet and the Web as potential delivery media. At that time and—in our view—even today, the lack of standardization and the complexity of dealing with this incredibly vast communications resource made its use less than attractive. We wanted a simple, consistent, affordable delivery vehicle that met our educational and service requirements.

We discovered the Convene software while looking at potential competitors to our Online initiative. The University of Phoenix, this country's largest and best established provider of distance-delivered education, uses a version of the Convene software and their own computer server. We were not particularly interested in heavily investing in our own hardware and attendant technological competencies. We found, however, that Convene would "lease" the software to us, on a per-student-served basis, and allow us to use their server and technical support personnel.

Because the communication process which is enabled by the Convene software is asynchronous and requires only a modem-equipped PC, it met both our requirements for non-time- and non-place-sensitive delivery. Additionally, it required no capital investment on our part and is paid for on an as-applied basis. Most significantly, however, its structure allowed for high levels of interactivity between the student and instructor and between "learning teams" of students.

We launched Lakeland Online with two trial courses during the summer of 1997. We increased our offering to nine courses in the fall, 20 courses last spring and 30 classes during the current summer semester. We have planned for 34 or 35 courses to be offered during the fall, 1998 term.

Student and faculty reaction to this initiative has been strongly positive. For the most part, faculty have found little difficulty in reinterpreting their onground presentation to the online environment. Students have found the flexibility of class "attendance" to be most attractive. And, the college is well satisfied that the quality of its distance delivered curriculum has remained intact.

Delivery Medium

Introduction

For over 9 years, Convene has provided schools, companies, and training organizations with leading-edge software and service to enable them to deliver their programs electronically at a distance. At the present time, over 35 schools are using Convene, and we are the world's largest provider of on-line education delivery.

Planning and Implementation

Once a school has decided to work with Convene to offer online courses, it needs to evaluate the market and identify a niche that they can service. Simply offering a hodge-podge of courses will not garner the momentum needed to see a program flourish.

The next step is faculty training, and this may well be the most important step. A core group of professors (3–5) should be identified and placed into an "on-line training certificate course." After this 6-week course, they are ready to deliver their own classes on-line. Of this

study of the weeks' materials. Homework assignments are placed in the Homework meeting, where students will receive, discuss and share difficulties. The heart of the online learning model, however, is found in the Discussion meeting. Online learning depends on the fluid, dynamic interchange of ideas between students and facilitator. Instructors will start the discussion topic(s) each week and serve as a discussion mediator, redirecting and focusing the process if it should stray from the learning objective. Small group discussion/consensus groups are an important tool for secondary student exchange.

A typical week for Lakeland Online students starts when they "Connect" and check their meeting notes. A student can expect to spend the week working on readings and homework, just as they would in a traditional onground classroom setting. Students use Convene to participate in classroom discussions, ask questions, and receive feedback from other students and their instructor.

Faculty Development

Faculty interest in participating in Lakeland Online has been quite strong. At the current time, 18 out of 43 full-time on-campus faculty members have been or are current facilitators. We have also involved 14 adjunct faculty members in our program. For the most part, this has been a very successful endeavor for the involved faculty. In order to prepare faculty, Lakeland Online has developed a comprehensive faculty training and support program. This program has three tiers, each of which helps prepare new faculty for the facilitation experience.

All new online faculty participate in a four-week online training session, moderated by Lakeland personnel. This comprehensive training program includes pedagogy, online education methodology and how to most effectively use the Convene delivery vehicle. While this training "meeting" has formal starting and ending dates, the actual training is ongoing. Training formally ends when the new faculty member has submitted an approved Online course syllabus.

The second part of our faculty support system is the implementation of a Mentor Program. Mentors are experienced online facilitators who are paired with new instructors. These mentors advise the new faculty member in the development of their individual classes. When the term starts, mentors are silent observers of their assigned instructor's classroom and are able to assist in the identification and resolution of special teaching challenges before those challenges are able to negatively impact the classroom experience.

The final tier is the Course Evaluation. At the conclusion of each term, all students are required to fill out and submit Course Evaluation Surveys, which include opportunities for them to evaluate the online environment and their online instructor. These student evaluations guide instructors, their mentors, and administrative personnel in identifying problems and arrive at ways to correct and refine the online process.

In addition to this formal faculty program, all online faculty members are joined to an online Lakeland Faculty Lounge. This is an informal way to generate conversation about the online experiences, both concerns and successes.

core group, one or two of the best online teachers should be identified to act as trainers for future faculty who wish to teach online. In effect, it's like setting up an in-house training program, where successive waves on online instructors are taught and mentored by their peers. We've found this to be the most effective method for training faculty and also a good way to develop a strong consensus for online teaching. At many schools, a divisive faculty has led to a poorly implemented program.

Last, but not least, the school needs to implement an effective marketing program. That program can include radio, print, TV, Internet, and/or on-campus advertisements. Convene can work with its client schools to develop a strong marketing strategy, or can refer the schools to marketing firms which specialize in this work.

Corporate Partnerships

From a more general point of view, Convene has enjoyed its success largely because it forms strong partnerships with schools, where each organization concentrates on its core competencies. Colleges and universities are good at working with faculty, enrolling students, developing marketing programs and, most importantly, delivering content. Convene is a technology and service firm which specializes in network maintenance, software development, help-desk support, and strategic partnerships with other firms (IBM, Microsoft etc.). Working side-by-side with Convene, clients have been able to create effective online programs in the least amount of time and with the smallest up-front capital investment.

Application

How Does Lakeland Online Work?

Lakeland Online is based on asynchronous, computer-mediated delivery. Since our students are typically working adults with busy lives that make sitting in a classroom difficult, our method has proved quite effective. Students do all of their work offline, and only go online to send and receive materials. This not only increases the convenience, it also has a significant impact in terms of educational benefits for the online learner. Students in an asynchronous learning environment have the time to clearly review and refine their responses. This leads to a greater level of depth, creating higher quality communications between students and their classes. Students are divided into learning groups within each class. Students can interact with each other, the facilitator, and the entire class. In order to promote discussion and impart to our classes a modicum of structure, Lakeland has adopted a model of classroom "meetings."

Lakeland courses are configured so that, in addition to a main meeting, each course has five additional meetings: Syllabus, Lecture, Biography, Discussion and Homework. Faculty may elect to create additional meetings for their classes. Frequently, facilitators choose to divide their students into small project/discussion groups. In larger classes, this helps to focus discussion, as well as to develop team consensus exercises.

At the beginning of each class week, facilitators place instructional information into the various meetings. The Lecture Meeting is used to deliver short, directed "lecturettes." Lecture meetings are "read only" meetings that contain information to focus a student's

Challenges

One of the clearest challenges in any online environment is the inability to "see" each other in a physical way. This lack of visual cues and the opportunity to see body language and facial expressions is the most obvious issue. Instructors and students have found ways of dealing with this different learning environment. Use of ASCII characters, as well as "writing the way we speak," helps to bring "emotion" into the online environment.

The way in which we typically deliver our educational information—the standard lecture format—is obviously different in the online environment. Lectures are written and are much shorter than their onground equivalent. Study materials and teaching techniques have also been adapted to a written rather than auditory learning environment, making use of the discussion strengths of the online learning environment.

A major challenges that a typical classroom instructor faces is the lack of active participation. Much time and effort is spent trying to increase the quantity of oral communication. In an online environment, however, all students have an equal opportunity to participate in the discussions, not just the extroverts. Potentially inhibiting and discriminatory factors such as race, handicap, gender, and physical appearance disappear in an online environment, and ideas become the major focus. In an online environment, an increase in both quantity and quality of communication is observed.

Online Versus Onground Study

During our first semester of delivering classes online (Summer, 1997), a study was conducted to evaluate the comparative effectiveness of online vs. onground course delivery techniques. The same instructor taught both an onground and online section of Business Information Processing. Care was taken to ensure that syllabi, tests, assignments, and other instructional materials were as identical as possible. In summary, the study found that there was no statistical difference in the learning outcomes between the onground and online class.

Autobiographical Sketches

After spending 26 years in the printing and publishing industries, primarily in sales and marketing management positions, **Lyle L. Krueger** joined the leadership team of Lakeland College in 1991. At the college, he has been involved in Resource Development, Communications and Marketing efforts, Enrollment Management and currently serves as Vice President for Educational Technology and Director of Lakeland's Online program. He received his MBA degree in 1997 and also serves as an adjunct instructor in Lakeland's Division of Business Administration—both onground and online.

Address: Lakeland College
PO Box 359
Sheboygan WI 53082
Email: kruegerll@lakeland.edu
URL: www.lakeland.edu/online
Phone: (920) 565-1498
Fax: (920) 565-1206

Dr. Cyndi Wilson Porter is a 1987 graduate of the College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio, with a BA in Chemistry. Her graduate education includes an MS (1991) and a Ph.D. (1995) from The University of Akron, Akron, OH, specializing in organometallic synthesis and x-ray crystallography. Since 1994, Dr. Porter has been an Assistant Professor of Chemistry at Lakeland. Her interest in the use of computers in chemistry education has led to numerous presentations and the authoring of chemistry education software. Dr. Porter is the Associate Director of Lakeland Online. In addition to her administrative duties, she is an active facilitator, mentor and faculty trainer.

Address: Lakeland College
PO Box 359
Sheboygan WI 53082
Email: porter@lakeland.edu
URL: www.lakeland.edu/online
Phone: (920) 565-1408
Fax: (920) 565-1206

After working several years as a trader for a mortgage-backed securities firm, **Daniel Burke** joined Convene International in February, 1995. His initial responsibilities involved support functions; specifically customer and technical support for Convene end-users. Within a year, he moved into account management and business development. Since 1996 he has serviced most major accounts for Convene, including Ecunet, UCLA, University of Phoenix, Baker College, and Lakeland. He is currently actively involved in the beta-testing and conversion of Convene's network to a Microsoft platform with open architecture to better service clients.

Address: Convene
250 Montgomery Street, 8th Floor
San Francisco CA 94104
Email: daniel_burke@convene.com
URL: www.convene.com
Phone: (415) 782-0484
Fax: (415) 782-0505